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The FDFA's Consular Directorate – an international centre of expertise?

At the Congress of the Swiss Abroad in Lausanne, Federal Councillor Didier Burkhalter once again underlined the importance of the Swiss community abroad in the Federal Council's foreign policy and its significance to the FDFA. By its very nature, foreign policy involves international cooperation. The FDFA's Consular Directorate has therefore been assigned the task of developing instruments and processes to support our representations abroad while also performing international networking activities concerning consular services and visas. An overview of its activities.

An increasing workload

700 000 – 16 000 000 – 500 000: these figures reflect the operational workload of the FDFA's consular services. Whether it is the number of Swiss abroad, the total number of trips abroad made by the Swiss each year or the number of visas issued by our representations annually, we are facing a constant increase in our workload coupled with increasingly complex and diverse cases.

In view of these circumstances, the Consular Directorate has been given a seemingly straightforward mandate – the coordination and optimisation of collaboration with international partners and other foreign ministries combined with the task of providing our consular services in an efficient and customer-oriented way.

Most of our European partners find themselves in a similar situation as they have to pursue the same objectives, albeit under sometimes different labels. Irrespective of whether a network of representations is undergoing reorganisation, restructuring or realignment, both we and our partners must ensure that our limited resources are deployed efficiently while maintaining or improving the quality of the services provided. Ideally, this results in an opportunity to complement the representation networks of partner states reciprocally to ensure a wide geographical spread of customer service. Two areas of cooperation are particularly topical.

Passports and biometrics

The biometric passport is a major issue. Even though many services are currently provided online, direct contact between the applicant and one of our passport centres (consulates or passport offices in Switzerland) is required to record the biometric data for passports. Why couldn't Swiss citizens, living in a country where Switzerland has no representation or where the nearest Swiss consulate is several hundred kilometres away, use a German consulate, for example, to record the biometric data? This attractive prospect is not feasible at present due to the different technologies of the systems deployed.

IT architecture – data security – system compatibility: from a biological perspective, a finger is a finger and its print is clearly identifiable. Yet, since bits and bytes have been replacing ink more and more, the recording and transmission of this biometric data within our IT systems requires a level of compatibility that does not yet exist internationally. An initial pilot project is nonetheless underway. The systems of Liechtenstein and Switzerland are currently being adapted to enable citizens of Liechtenstein to use the technology at Swiss representations for recording biometric data for their passports in future. The data will then be sent to the passport office in Vaduz.

The idea of collaboration with foreign partners in the processing of passport applications (recording and transmission of biometric data) remains a contentious issue. The heated debate on data protection in Switzerland during the referendum on the introduction of the biometric passport, which was approved by the tightest of margins (50.1%), serves as a reminder of this.

Well-coordinated collaboration

The second area of international cooperation is the issuing of visas. Switzerland is actively committed to the development of the Schengen philosophy of shared responsibility by regularly concluding agreements with other Schengen states on representation in visa matters for countries and

regions where we do not have our own representation with consular services. The system is based on reciprocity, and we are currently working with ten Schengen states that we now represent in various constellations at 17 locations and which, in return, process visa applications for Switzerland at 19 locations.

International protection?

The over 700,000 Swiss citizens abroad and the ever increasing mobility of the population are resulting in a continual rise in the number of consular protection cases. The closure of the consular departments at various embassies and consulates general and the concentration of consular services at regional consular centres are sometimes resulting in longer distances between Swiss citizens abroad and the administration. Cooperation with European partner states is also an option here, although Switzerland finds itself in a unique position. Citizens of European Union member states receive protection from the diplomatic or consular representations of any EU state in accordance with EU directives. This provision does not apply to Switzerland as a non-EU member.

Solutions must therefore be sought bilaterally, that allow Swiss citizens to receive support from non-Swiss representations under certain circumstances. Close international cooperation already exists in crisis situations (political unrest, evacuations, etc.) while just one single bilateral agreement has been concluded on everyday consular collaboration. An agreement between Austria and Switzerland from 1979 enables the provision of consular services for citizens of the other state at certain locations where just one of the two states is represented. As the content of this agreement and the list of representations concerned are outdated, there are plans to update this and initial talks are underway. Similar negotiations are taking place with other European countries.

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International contact

In addition to negotiations with European states, Switzerland is also in contact with other possible partner countries with overlapping or complementary interests. Discussions are being held with Turkey, Russia, Brazil and China on a wide range of issues, such as consular collaboration, integration of the respective immigrant communities, the promotion of tourism and access to the international community in Geneva.

International collaboration and public private partnerships (PPP)

With the aim of supporting the promotional activities of Switzerland Tourism, especially in the emerging markets of India, China and Indonesia, the Consular Directorate is

collaborating closely with partners in the tourism industry. Solutions are being sought that enable travellers from these countries to visit Switzerland without major obstacles. This involves establishing smooth and well-coordinated visa management between the various parties involved – local travel agents, Switzerland Tourism and the Swiss representations. This PPP approach allows all parties to adapt to the requirements responsibly and to the situations faced by the other players.

What next?

The path towards ensuring efficient, institutionalised and regular exchange has therefore been mapped out. It is now a matter of assessing the next steps and areas of coopera-

tion. This approach will be pursued over the coming years, and the Consular Directorate will continue to develop its international networking activities with great enthusiasm in order to fulfil the mandate assigned to it.

REORGANISATION OF THE NETWORK OF EMBASSIES AND CONSULATES

As part of the ongoing review of the Swiss network of representations, which has resulted in the opening of regional consular centres at 11 locations worldwide since the beginning of 2011 during its first and second phases, we are now embarking on the third phase. The reorganisation will be completed by 2014. This third phase will affect several representations worldwide whose consular departments are to be centralised.

The relevant Swiss communities abroad will be kept informed directly by their Swiss representation. We are aware of the inconvenience

that the reorganisation is causing for some Swiss citizens and are therefore simultaneously providing support measures. These include the opportunity to submit biometric data for Swiss passports at any Swiss representation or any passport office in Switzerland (in conjunction with a passport application within six months at the responsible Swiss representation), the possibility of using a mobile biometric data capture system and the FDFA helpline, which has been available 24 hours a day since spring 2012 (see page 29 for contact details).

CLOSED CONSULAR DEPARTMENT

(the representations concerned will remain open for safeguarding interests unless otherwise specified)

Guatemala City closure of the embassy

La Paz (Bolivia)

Ankara (Turkey)

Los Angeles responsible for the states of AZ, CO, NM and the Californian counties of Los Angeles, San Bernardino, San Diego, Santa Barbara, Orange, Imperial, Ventura, Riverside, Kern

Chicago closure of the consulate general responsible for the states of ND, SD, IL, ID, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, OH, WI

Maputo (Mozambique)

Toronto (Canada) closure of the consulate general responsible for the states of ON, MB, SK, NT

Sarajevo (Bosnia)

Skopje (Macedonia)

Nikosia (Cyprus)

Jeddah (Saudi Arabia) closure of the consulate general responsible for Tabuk, Medina, Makkah, Baha, Asir, Jizan and Najran

Dubai (UAE) responsible for Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Um Al Qwain, Ras Al Khaimah and Fujairah

NEW REGIONAL CONSULAR CENTRE RESPONSIBLE

Not yet decided definitively; planned: San José (Costa Rica)

Lima (Peru)

Istanbul (Turkey)

San Francisco

New York – for the states ND, SD, MI, MN, OH, WI

Washington – for the states of IL, NE, KS, IA, MO, IN

Pretoria (South Africa)

Montreal (Canada)

Vienna (Austria)

Pristina (Kosovo)

Athens (Greece)

Riyadh (Saudi Arabia)

Abu Dhabi (UAE)

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